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THE NORTHERN BOUNDARY LINE OF ILLINOIS SURVEYED BY HIRAM ROUNTREE

The question is asked among Illinois historians: "Who surveyed the northern boundary of Illinois?" In the recent history of Montgomery county, written by A. T. Strange of Hillsboro, the question is answered in a way that is of more than ordinary interest to the people of Montgomery county, for Mr. Strange insists that Hiram Rountree, one of the most prominent pioneers of Montgomery county, and for many years a resident of Hillsboro, was actually the man who did most of the work which proved of so great importance in later years.

In the history, Mr. Strange says: "Who surveyed the Northern Boundary of Illinois? This question is asked, because apparently, an injustice has been done our most deserving pioneer, in not accrediting to him the part he performed in a most important and difficult state work. Hiram Rountree certainly was one of three commissioners (and possibly the most active of the three) appointed to survey and mark the boundary line between Illinois and Wisconsin. But in the reports as submitted to the Department at Washington, no mention seems to be made of his participation in the work. From a mass of correspondence, conducted in the main by Hon. I. S. Blackwelder (now of Chicago), in relation to this matter, we have tried to prepare a summary of the facts and venture some deductions therefrom.'

"Mr. Blackwelder in a letter to Mr. Strange under date of October 31, 1914, said: 'The subject (of this survey) was referred to several times in my conversations with Mr. Rountree and my recollection is as clear as noonday that he stated to me that he was the commissioner appointed by the state of Illinois to establish this boundary line, and that in doing so he crossed the state five times, ending finally at a point on the Mississippi River where a great stone was placed to mark the western end of the line. His descrip-

tions of the hardships encountered, of marching through the tall grass and heavy underbrush, and swimming rivers, were so graphic that it made a deep impression on my mind and those who knew Judge Rountree, knew him as a most truthful and conscientious man, who would make no statement of this kind which was not true.'

"In an obituary notice published in a Hillsboro paper after his death in 1873, we find the following: 'In 1830-1831, he with others was appointed under the administration of General Jackson, commissioner to view and mark out the northern boundary line of Illinois, which service he fully performed.'

"In Reynolds' pioneer history of Illinois, we find these words: 'Messinger was appointed with a gentleman of Hillsboro to survey on the part of the state of Illinois, the northern limits of the state, Lucius Lyons on the part of the United States.'

"The report of Mr. Messinger was dated January 29, 1833. It shows that Mr. Daniel R. Davis, upon the part of the United States, and Mr. Andrew Brailey, on the part of the United States, were assistants; Mr. Brailey, it will be remembered, was a son-in-law of Jesse Townsend, the first Presbyterian minister in Montgomery county and was evidently appointed on the recommendation of Mr. Rountree, who knew him well. From the report as given, it was stated that the work was not completed in 1831, on account of cold weather setting in on them. In May, 1832, Judge Rountree went into the Black Hawk war at the head of a company of volunteers, but was mustered out in August of the same year. From all available evidence, he resumed the work on the boundary line after his return from the Black Hawk war, as it would have been physically impossible to have run a line five times on foot and horseback across the state in 1831, after the October meeting at Galena and the closing of the winter. The report states that the stone which was set to mark the end of the survey was several feet long and estimated to weigh five tons. This corresponds with Mr. Rountree's statement to Mr. Blackwelder, and shows that Mr. Rountree was present when

the work was completed else he could not have said the western and concluding end of the survey 'was marked by a great stone.'

"Now from the above quotations it is perfectly clear that Mr. Rountree was appointed as one of the commissioners. While the act of Congress hereafter referred to, seems to provide for one of the commissioners to be from Wisconsin, there is no mention of such a commissioner ever participating in this work, in the report or correspondence consulted. Mr. Blackwelder states that Judge Rountree told him they waited for the Wisconsin commissioner to arrive but not getting there, he proceeded without him. The inference is that Messinger, Rountree and Lyons constituted the whole commission.

"The next question is who did the work. The act of Congress under which this survey was to be made was passed by Congress April 18, 1831, and included boundaries in Alabama, Illinois and other controverted lines. Mr. Lucius Lyons, the United States commissioner, was a resident of Detroit, Mich., and his control apparently was general, rather than local, and he died before the completion of the work. Mr. Blackwelder says 'he died about the time the party was to begin the work.' It is therefore apparent that he never signed the report personally and that his signature was merely attached to credit him with the position he held for the United States. In the report of the commission as signed by Messinger with Lyons' name attached, they say: 'They (the commissioners) met at Galena in the latter part of October 1831, preparatory to commencing the survey which is just now completed.'

"Another statement made by Mr. Rountree to Mr. Blackwelder was that while 'awaiting the coming of the Wisconsin commissioner they spent several weeks in making astronomical observations.' In the report as made by Mr. Messinger, he used almost the same words, when he says, 'more than a month had elapsed before a survey could be made to the entire satisfaction of the board.' As showing the accuracy of Mr. Rountree's statement, he relates that the survey extended from the Mississippi river to Lake Michigan, while the report of Mr. Messinger is less definite as to the lake end of the work.

It seems apparent that Mr. Rountree was present and participated in all of the work unless it might have been a series of lines run on the western end and before leaving there, it is stated, that only one surveyor was retained, he being the Illinois surveyor, who might have been either Messinger, Rountree or Brailey, as all were surveyors. It is the opinion of Mr. Strange and Mr. Blackwelder that when the time came for making the report in January, 1833, Mr. Lyons being dead, his name was attached as a matter of form, and, Mr. Rountree not being present, Mr. Messinger did not assume the privilege of signing his name and the treasury department accepted and filed the report as submitted without requiring the signature of Mr. Rountree.* While an injustice was done Mr. Rountree in omitting his approval of the report, and his signature thereto, we do not assert that such was an intentional wrong; on the other hand we think the report was a hastily prepared statement made with respect to the requirements of the statute and merely to comply with the requirements of the United States authorities."

Mr. Strange and Mr. Blackwelder are to be commended for ferreting out these facts which are so valuable to Montgomery county history. It is well known in this community that Mr. Strange, the author of the history, has spent several years in gathering facts and correspondence relating to county history.

Mr. Blackwelder was county clerk of Montgomery county from December 3, 1861, to December 3, 1865. He was considerably less than 22 years old when he was sworn into office and the Secretary of State told him he was the youngest man who ever held the position in the state. Later he went to Chicago and became president of the Western Insurance Union in 1903 and 1904. He has been prominent in community and insurance work in Chicago for many years.

*The Hon. Elam L. Clarke of Waukegan, Ill., who has made an intensive study of the matter of the northern boundary line of Illinois thinks that Mr. Rountree resigned on account of illness and that Mr. Messinger was appointed in his place.